

Reading Matthew Without Anti-Semitism

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I first wanted to unpack the differences between antisemitism and AntiJewish. Anti-Semitism is more based on race and discriminating against the Jewish people as a whole. One example we see of that through history where it really drove hate was the Holocaust. Whereas AntiJewish is more discrimination based on the religion itself. We see this used in scholarly articles where AntiJewish is used to describe how Christians may view the way that the Jewish people interpret the Bible as wrong. AntiJewish is more based on religion, not towards people. Both terms are used interchangeably but this author is arguing that they are different words with different meanings so they should stand alone. Why should you read Matthew without Antisemitism? Because you should. You'll see more of why this is just the humane thing to do.

First, let's see what Matthew's goals really are. Matthew is neither AntiJewish nor is he antisemitic. His goals were not to have hate upon the Jewish people but more he was criticizing the Jewish people and the community. He was not happy with the way that the Bible was being interpreted, or the fact that the Scribes and Pharisees were opposing Jesus' views on certain topics such as divorce, The Sabbath and blasphemy. Matthew wanted the Jewish people to recognize Jesus as the Messiah and the Son of God sent here to make things better. Within his community he wasn't seeing that. He wanted to win over the Jewish community and form new leadership. That new leadership would be Matthew and Jesus' followers because they were the only fit leaders, they were the only ones who truly understood what the word of God was and they wanted to get that across to the Jewish people and change how they have been moulded over time.

In trying to do so, Matthew wanted to paint the former Jewish leadership as being illegitimate. How he did this was by accusing those leaders as being hypocrites and not understanding the word and God and in turn misleading the Jewish people. This backfired because the Jewish people did not necessarily listen to him. Another thing that a Matthew was opposed to was leadership titles such as Rabbi and Master. Matthew truly believed that

Jesus was the only leader. There exists some hierarchy where Jesus is on the top and everyone else below him is on the same level. For someone to be a Rabbi or Master, would be going against this “equality” and we can’t have this because Jesus is the only leader.

The Scribes and Pharisees were called hypocrites by Matthew throughout the text and eventually it became synonymous. Matthew describes that the Pharisees may be preaching something that is true, but their actions prove that they are hypocrites because they did not practice what they preach. However, we do see some hypocrisy when it came to Matthew as he spoke about loving your enemy: “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you” - Matthew 5:44. The way he spoke about his opponents was just bitter. One might be wondering where all of this is when he was speaking about the Scribes and Pharisees. Perception and intention are not the same in Matthew. Matthew did not intend to be in conflict with the Jewish people for going down the wrong path. He blamed the leaders who were responsible for teaching the people. His goal was to present new leadership who consisted of him and Jesus’ followers who understood why Jesus was here and God’s true intention. He did not intend to be anti-semitic or AntiJewish but we see that this is an impact. The way that it was perceived led to hate towards Jewish people. Led to antisemitism, as mention before in the holocaust. It actually led to division and not union within the Jewish community.

When interpreting Matthew there are a few things to keep in mind.

1. Make a distinction between Jews and Judaism. The Jewish people (ethnicity) or Judaism(religion) also differentiating leaders.
2. Understanding the goals of the Pharisees
3. Educating yourself and realizing that there are flaws within the book of Matthew.

I wanted to end on this quote so we can really marinate on the impacts on antisemitism:

“Even if his polemics were within in the 1st century Jewish community and thus not Anti-Semitic or Anti-Jewish, inner cultural polemics can kill” Saldarini. A. J, (2001), 174.

Even though it was just conflict within the Jewish community, Matthew himself being a Jewish teacher criticising g leadership. This led to a bigger issue where hate was towards all Jewish people it is important that we try to understand before we take action.

References:

Saldarini, A. J. 1. (2001). Reading Matthew without anti-Semitism. *The Gospel of Matthew in current study*, 166-184.